

INTERVIEW WITH JOE MCCLUNG
BY ED GROSSMAN AUGUST 22, 2002

MR. GROSSMAN: This is August 22, 2003. This is Ed Grossman and I am going to do an interview with Joe McClung. He is the current Skipper of the motor vessel Surfbird, the Fish and Wildlife Service research vessel stationed in Juneau, Alaska. Joe, I was hoping that you could tell us a little about your personal background. First off, where were you born, and when>

MR. MCCLUNG: I was born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1942.

MR. GROSSMAN: And your parents are they native to Texas?

MR. MCCLUNG: Right, they have lived in that area since my grandfather's time. I actually was raised around Plainview, Texas.

MR. GROSSMAN: Where did you spend your early years going to school and such?

MR. MCCLUNG: I moved from the Kansas/Oklahoma border in 1950, to Plainview. I went grade school there. In about the second or third grade and on through high school I went to school in a little town called Crest, Texas.

MR. GROSSMAN: What were your hobbies? What sort of events influenced you to become a mariner?

MR. MCCLUNG: Not any of them! I was raised on a horse ranch, and small farm. I worked with animals all of my life. I intended to be a Veterinarian when I went to school. I was not raised around boats at all. I didn't have any boating experience until I graduated from high school and came to Alaska when I was seventeen. The only job I could find in Alaska was boating. That's when I started.

MR. GROSSMAN: What kind of boat was that? Was it a fishing vessel?

MR. MCCLUNG: No, I ran thirteen-foot skiff for the Fish and Game. I was working as a 'stream guard' or Protection Agent in the southeast Sitka and Petersburg areas.

MR. GROSSMAN: How did you graduate to bigger boats?

MR. MCCLUNG: I went two seasons, two summers in southeast Alaska for Bob Laguire in Sitka and Sid Morgan out of Petersburg. Then, I moved to Anchorage and ran some riverboats up there for pleasure [trips]; sporting and hunting and those things.

MR. GROSSMAN: Where you guiding, or just transporting?

MR. MCCLUNG: Transporting game and hunting in the Anchorage area. I eventually moved to Fairbanks to finish my degree up there. I was going for a Wildlife Management degree. I stayed at the university there for about seven years and then.. do you want me to continue like this?

MR. GROSSMAN: Oh yeah, sure!

MR. MCCLUNG: After the Fairbanks area, I moved back down to Sitka and bought a concrete plant where I was manufacturing concrete blocks. Then I started buying pleasure boats and doing hunting and fishing around the Sitka area. That evolved into running a charter boat for ten years there. When I bought a larger boat and running tour boats for Bob Allen; taking people off the tour ships and going to St. Litz [sounds like] area and showing them the wildlife in that area. I was just running more and more of his tour boats until he offered me a job building the boat that he was building for the Greens Creek Mine in Juneau. I forget the name of that boat.

MR. GROSSMAN: I don't remember the name, but it was a Catamaran.

MR. MCCLUNG: It was a 105 foot Catamaran that carried 150 people over to the Greens Creek mine from Auk Bay Harbor four times a day. I did that for a year. Then a Fish and Wildlife job came open and I bid on the Surfbird job.

MR. GROSSMAN: What year was that Joe?

MR. MCCLUNG: That was in 1989. It was right at the time of the oil spill.

MR. GROSSMAN: So you were hired and jumped right in to taking the boat to Prince William Sound?

MR. MCCLUNG: Right. I skipped over something. When I was in Sitka for seventeen years, I was also running a tugboat for the pulp mill; towing chip barges and log rafts in to the pulp mill. That was the same time frame that I was running tour boats for Bob Allen. And back to where we stopped. I did get a job running the Surfbird in 1989 when the oil spill was happening. At that time it was a temporary job, just to last thirty days. During the oil spill, they called me up and added another thirty days to the time frame. We could only extend it for two, thirty-day periods. Then they made it a permanent job. Since 1989, about thirteen years, I've still been running the boat!

MR. GROSSMAN: Do you feel that your original desire to be a Wildlife Manager has helped you in the job of running the research vessel that takes people out for that kind of work?

MR. MCCLUNG: I have been working with a lot of tourists and a lot people that want to fish and hunt. So that's kept me involved with the wildlife. I have been seeing the enjoyment that people have with wildlife. I have gotten to fulfill all of my interests in this job. I am also a plumber, carpenter, electrician, pipe fitter, and all of this business too. I get to do all of this in maintaining the boat. Plus, I get to work with the wildlife and the people. I get to be involved in all of the difference ventures these people have working with the wildlife.

MR. GROSSMAN: It sounds like the best of all worlds for a guy like you who is a jack-of-all-trades!

MR. MCCLUNG: It's kind of a culmination of my life. Here towards these last few years, I have been able to do it all, everything that I know how to do!

MR. GROSSMAN: Joe, were you in the Military at all?

MR. MCCLUNG: No, I was never in the Military. I was "1A" for ten years, and I was never called.

MR. GROSSMAN: How about your family, is there a wife and kids?

MR. MCCLUNG: I was married when I was eighteen years old. I had to get my parents to sign for me. That was in Anchorage. I had two children, a boy and a girl. They were born in 1963 and 1965. My son is still in Sitka. He is a millwright-pipe fitter. My daughter is in Pocatello, Idaho. I was divorces in 1982 and moved to Juneau in 1988 with the Greens Creek Mine job. I was remarried in 1990 to Barbie. We've been happy ever since.

MR. GROSSMAN: So your daily activities Joe can you describe them generally? What you do on the boat?

MR. MCCLUNG: My trips are usually ten-day trips. Some are thirty-day trips. During the oil spills or emergencies I am probably on the job three months steady. Say on an average ten-day trip or two weeks I get up at six o'clock in the morning and fix breakfast for the crews and check the boats for oil and gas and make sure they are in the water, ready to do their work. I wait until the crews are ready to go out into the field and I either go with them and run a skiff; running them ashore and picking them up, or, I give them a skiff, stay onboard and maintain a radio check with them through out the day until they come back for lunch. Then, they go out into the field again and probably are out until dinnertime. Sometimes it's a late dinner. Then we usually spend the night where we are anchored and move the boat to the next work site the next morning. It depends on when they come in from work. We'll move it to the next work site, put them ashore, and do the same thing. Sometimes we'll get in the skiffs and cruise all day long along the

shoreline. For instance, when we are working Eagle nest tree surveys. Sometimes, if they are doing a Seal capture the team will take the skiff and go out and do their own work. Sometimes they bring the Seals back to the Surfbird. Sometimes they just do their work in the field. If we are working with deer or birds, each trip is different. If we are working with birds, sometimes we have spotters that work off of the Surfbird and I just move the Surfbird from point to point where there's a bird refuge or an island or something that we are counting birds from. If it's Puale Bay we move up along the cliffs. If it's the bird islands, just out of Seward then we anchor offshore and let Dave Rosenhall and Leslie Slatte and some of those folks cruise around the island and do their counting in Zodiacs. We bring them back on board to spend the night. At place like that there is no place to anchor, so we travel to someplace to spend the night and go back to the work sites the next day. There's so many different trips we have done, and they are all a little bit different.

MR. GROSSMAN: You mentioned working with Seals, and you mentioned deer work. That must be with the Fish and Game. You also mentioned bird surveys and the oil spill. You've seen a large variety of work. Was there any particular type of project that you enjoy more than the others?

MR. MCCLUNG: Actually, I like when I am involved with the skiffs; whenever I am running the skiff all day long, cruising new shorelines or places I haven't been. I like to run the boat always to new places and anchor in a different place every time. You see more country. It's kind of like beachcombing. Cruising around in the boat and just seeing new places all of the time. When I am involved in the skiff all day, I get to go ashore some. I get to see everything close at hand. Sometimes I need to run the skiffs if we don't have a qualified crew. I kind of like the hands on stuff. Whenever I stay on the Surfbird all day and cooks meals and things like that; it's enjoyable too but probably not at much.

MR. GROSSMAN: Joe, what's the major impediment to your job?

MR. MCCLUNG: Explain that a little bit.

MR. GROSSMAN: Well, like, I know that you face a lay off each year. Does that inhibit your ability to maintain the boat? Have you found that money is a limiting factor? Any other thing like that.

MR. MCCLUNG: I see what you mean. The major impediment to my job is being laid off every year and trying to figure out how I am going to pay my expenses when I am not receiving an income during the winter months. My lay off makes it really hard to make my house payments and survive during the winter. That's probably the major impediment. It's really hard to get the boat functional and ready to go out on the summer work when I've been off all winter and I haven't been able to maintain it. The boat just

sits there. And in winter in southeast Alaska there's so many things that go wrong with it every winter that it takes throughout the season to find all of the things that have gotten rusted and got wet, and all of the things that I need to repair. Sometimes I don't realize I have some lights that burned out during the winter and I don't realize until I am out on my first trip. Not being able to maintain the boats during the wintertime is a real drawback to my job.

MR. GROSSMAN: How about people that have influenced your job? Have any of the former Skippers have any input for you?

MR. MCCLUNG: When I took the job, the prior Skipper, Andy Anderson has just had a heart attack. He was medically retired. He was not permitted to go down on the boat and show me how everything ran, and how to operate the boat because they thought he might have another heart attack while he was onboard. I had to just figure out how everything works on the boat. This is on a sixty-five foot vessel that's right now about forty-nine years old. I was able to work pretty closely with Ted Estrada on the Curlew. He was able to come over and give me a hand. Since the boats are hooked up very similar he was able to show me how a lot of things work. We work together pretty good.

MR. GROSSMAN: Can you give me a little history on the boat, as you know? Was that boat built in San Diego?

MR. MCCLUNG: I have read different things that conflict a little bit, but I believe it to have been built in San Diego in 1953. It still has the original engine in the vessel at this time. It's a D-375 Caterpillar, that was built in 1953. It's still running the boat. There are quite a few changes and upgrades that have been made in the vessel. Today it's not in original condition. It's got a lot of things that it did not have before; lights and electronics and things like that. The history of the boat; it was built for running the rivers of Korea. As I understand it, it had a forward cargo hold that carried twenty-five tons of cargo. It had a stripped out after-cabin that carried forty troops. It just had benches across. There was no galley or anything at that time. There was a little eight foot section up in the forepeak was totally enclosed and had an escape hatch that they used. There were three crewmen who at the time had a shower and a sink, a cook stove and six bunks in that little eight foot section up there! The military service is confidential so I don't know if it ever went to Korea, or what it might have done in Korea. I just know that after that time its was owned by a research station in California. I can't think of that place. When the Fish and Wildlife Service needed a boat for eagle surveys in southeast Alaska, they found this. Fred Robards; I saw a slip where he located this boat in 1969. He located this vessel and thought it would be the most appropriate vessel for the waters of southeast Alaska doing their eagle nest surveys. At that time the American, the Bald Eagle was endangered I believe. They were trying to protect it up here, and mark the nests, and capture some eaglets and transfer them around down south to other states that have lost their eagles. They bought this vessel from Tiburan Research Station in California. They brought it to

Seattle and retrofitted it for southeast Alaska and then brought it up. It's been used for a lot of bird work; eagles as well as other birds since we received it in 1969.

MR. GROSSMAN: So mostly it was under the Raptor Management Program?

MR. MCCLUNG: Right. I don't know if they had a Raptor Management in 1969 when they got it, but it might have been. Fred Robards what the main person in charge of the vessel.

MR. GROSSMAN: So it's been in the possession of the Juneau Station since 1969?

MR. MCCLUNG: Right.

MR. GROSSMAN: Do you know what the "T" numbers were?

MR. MCCLUNG: T 437. The T boats are; the Coast Guard tells me that there is a regulation for sub-chapter T vessels. This is classified as a sub-chapter T vessel because of its size and configuration. The T is also a troop transport vessel. There may be other designations, is what that "T" really stands for.

MR. GROSSMAN: What's your opinion of its sea worthiness in southeast Alaska? Do you think it's a pretty good work platform?

MR. MCCLUNG: It's an excellent work platform for the southeast. We carry two seventeen-foot skiffs on the forward deck. And we have a three thousand ton crane that we...no, it's a three thousand *pound* crane that we lift our skiffs onboard and off with. We can take it anyplace we need to go. We can put our workboats off and we have a good place to sleep people and feed them. They can take showers and it's real comfortable. It handles the weather well. When we go across the gulf with it to Homer or Kodiak we have the stabilizers that we put down on each side of the boat that really keeps it handling well in rough seas. We very seldom have to use those in the southeast. But occasionally, even here when weather picks up and we have six to eight-foot seas and some real heavy winds we still use them down here.

MR. GROSSMAN: Joe, of your career on the boat, what would you say has been the high point?

MR. MCCLUNG: I really don't know of one particular high point. What I really do enjoy on there is that I get to do the work that I enjoy. I like to do hands on work more than I would office work. The high point is dealing with people. I love dealing with people and showing them new places and doing the hands on work that is required of a ship operator. Whenever you are the Captain the deckhand the cook and the crew and everything else, and you are always taking people out that have never been on the boat

before, the responsibility is quite large! When you take vessel out for safety and other things you are concerned about so many people. But I think it just keeps me kind of on the edge all of the time. It keeps me pretty sharp because I have to focus on so many different things. You can just kind of forget yourself when you are out there doing all of these things that you just do without thinking.

MR. GROSSMAN: Well, what would you say was the low point?

MR. MCCLUNG: Well, the low point in the job is as I mentioned before, getting laid off in the wintertime and not being able to maintain it like... I feel like the boat is part of me. I've been on it so long. I like to keep it in top shape and it's really hard when you have a real low budget and you don't have enough time to really do the work that needs to be done on it.

MR. GROSSMAN: From your experiences, what would consider to have been your most dangerous or frightening experience?

MR. MCCLUNG: I have had a lot of frightening experiences! [Laughing] One of them has to be in the Barren Islands where all storms are generated.

MR. GROSSMAN: The Barren Islands are off of the coast of Kodiak? Between Kodiak and Homer?

MR. MCCLUNG: It's the Kenai Peninsula there. The water is really bad there. Coming around the corner, trying to take a short cut in to Homer I ran into some really bad water. I was wondering if the boat was going to be able to stand up. It was really bad. It's in between three islands where the storm waves come in. They hit one island, bank off of it and reflect back to the other side. You are catching water from both sides. There was a heavy wind, and it was like trying to ride a horse. It was kind of hard to hang on! Then, I guess the other bad experience is that I remember trying to go twelve miles across Clarence Strait. I went broadside into some heavy seas that were coming in. The weatherman said it was going to be eight-foot seas. Before we realized it, we were in thirteen-foot seas and we couldn't turn around. It was so bad. That was the time that the Surfbird got submerged. We went under the water. The windows were totally black and you couldn't see any daylight. Water was coming in the doors and all of the hatches. It threw Jake out of the bed and scooted him across the bunks and across the floor. We were trying to make a turn in some of that weather; we were tacking. We were taking on the stern for a little while and then quartering in to it for a little while. Ever so often we would trade from tacking to taking in on the stern. I was in the midst of one of those turns whenever we caught a broadside and that's when we submerged it. That was pretty frightening!

MR. GROSSMAN: But it was watertight enough so it just corked back up?

MR. MCCLUNG: Yeah, it corked back up. It didn't turn over. The boat handled it really well. I was really impressed.

MR. GROSSMAN: What was your most humorous experience?

MR. MCCLUNG: Oh, I can't remember.

MR. GROSSMAN: Lot's of them too, huh? To offset the frightening?

MR. MCCLUNG: I'd had to think about that.

MR. GROSSMAN: What would you tell others about your career working for the Fish and Wildlife Service?

MR. MCCLUNG: I think working for the Fish and Wildlife Service is great. I mostly know about the boating end of the Fish and Wildlife Service. I am a wage grade employee so I understand that best. I think that being a wage grade employee boat operator for the Fish and Wildlife Service is a great job!

MR. GROSSMAN: What are your thoughts on the future?

MR. MCCLUNG: My future...I am pretty pleased doing what I am now, running the boat. It depends on are we going to keep the boat? Is the boat going to be re-powered and continue to do service in southeast Alaska? Are we going to get another boat? Is my health going to be good? I'll probably stay with the same job until I am able to retire.

MR. GROSSMAN: Is there anything that you wish you had done differently along the line?

MR. MCCLUNG: I wish I had gotten this job when I was a lot younger. Back in those days when I was chartering, I would have loved to have been doing this.

MR. GROSSMAN: For a longer time, that's great!

MR. MCCLUNG: Yeah for a longer time.

MR. GROSSMAN: Anything more on humorous situations?

MR. MCCLUNG: No, I'll think of it after this is over with. Oh, I can think of one humorous situation where Michael Jacobsen took a temporary employee out in a skiff to cruise the shoreline and look for nest trees. They came back to the Surfbird and the girl only had a float coat and river boots on!

MR. GROSSMAN: And how did he explain that?

MR. MCCLUNG: Well, they said they had seen some wolves chasing deer, and as they were watching them they saw some bear. They decided to go ashore where they could spot the bear, deer and wolves better and they didn't tie their skiff up very good. The tide came in and when they came back to the skiff it was drifting off down the bay. This girl thought she could capture the skiff and she started running down the shoreline, throwing off her clothes so she could jump in and swim out to the skiff! Jake came along behind her picking up her clothes and putting them in his packsack. She swam out to the skiff and she could not get it. She swam back to the shore. The other boat across the way had seen her with binoculars running naked down the beach so they came over and rescued them and got their skiff for them!

MR. GROSSMAN: That's not a sight you see everyday! Okay, Joe, thank you for your time. We'll see that you get a copy of the transcript so that you can see that everything is accurate. If there's anything you want to add later, we can probably do that also.